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ABSTRACT

Questions that can be posed concerning the present state of affairs in limiting or preventing disciplinary problems include: Have there been significant changes in disciplinary problems over the past three decades? Are problems more or less severe than reported in the recent past? Are there patterns of discipline problems related to demographic variables such as size, geographic location, and minority percentage? and Do principals and assistant principals view various problems in different ways? A random sample of 500 secondary school administrators in Georgia was sent a list of 27 disciplinary problems and a questionnaire about problems in their school. Each of the 292 respondents ranked the five most common and five most serious disciplinary problems. With several exceptions, the most common problems (disruptive behavior, tardiness, defiance of authority, problem behavior on busses, and fighting) were also the most serious. Administrators view some problems as more common and more serious than drug or alcohol abuse. A large percentage of assistant principals viewed problems such as alcohol and drug abuse as more serious than principals did. Schools having minority percentages above and below 50 percent differed little in their levels of discipline problems. The results suggest that the nature of disciplinary problems has been changing over the past three decades. There is a shift in the direction of a greater concern over direct physical or verbal expressions of aggression than in earlier surveys. Two tables of discipline problem rankings are included. (7 References) (EJS)

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Discipline

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**Discipline Problems in a State's Secondary Schools
Reported by Principals and Assistant Principals**

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Abstract

A random sample of 500 secondary school administrators of a southeastern state was sent a questionnaire requesting ranking the frequency and seriousness of 27 potential disciplinary problems in their schools. A total of 58% of the sample returned the questionnaire. The results suggest that the nature of disciplinary problems has been changing over the past three decades. There is a shift in the direction of a greater concern over direct physical or verbal expressions of aggression than in earlier surveys. Implications of the findings for management training are included.

**Discipline Problems in a State's Secondary Schools
Reported by Principals and Assistant Principals**

There is a need to be aware of continuous changes in various discipline problems experienced at the secondary school level. Such problems have been reported in the early 1960s through the early 1980s (Kingston & Gentry, 1961, 1979; Weber & Sloan, 1986). However, the latest survey (Weber & Sloan, 1986) was completed in 1984.

A number of questions can be posed concerning the present state of affairs confronting educators whose main mission is to limit or prevent disciplinary problems so that they may provide a positive learning environment conducive to educational progress. Among the questions that can be raised are the following: Have there been significant changes in discipline problems faced by secondary school educators over the past three decades? If so, are these problems more or less severe than those reported in the recent past? Also, are there patterns of discipline problems related to demographic variables such as size and geographic location of the

school, percentage of minority students? Finally, do principals and assistant principals view various discipline problems in the same or different fashion? The present study was undertaken to attempt to answer these questions.

Method

In order to assess the questions raised, a list of 27 discipline problems was generated with the assistance of a group of secondary school administrators. A random sample of 500 secondary school administrators throughout the state of Georgia was sent a questionnaire requesting information about disciplinary problems in their school. Each respondent was asked to first rank the five most common discipline problems and then to rank the five most serious problems.

The survey was restricted to principals and assistant principals. The following demographic information was requested: sex, population of the area served by the school system, number of students attending the school, geographic location within the state, general nature of the school population, i.e., urban, suburban, rural, urban-suburban, rural-suburban,

and percentage of minority students.

Results

A total of 292 administrators responded to the survey. This represented a response rate of 58% of the group originally contacted. Table 1 presents the rankings for the most common problems. Table 2 presents the rankings for the most serious problems.

Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here

With several exceptions, there was a high correlation between the rankings; i.e., the most common problems also tended to be the most serious. In descending order, the five most common discipline problems were: disruptive behavior, tardiness, defiance of authority, problem behaviors on the bus, and fighting. With the exception of tardiness, these problems all reflect physical and/or verbal aggression. The second ranking indicated that the five most serious problems were: fighting, disruptive behavior, defiance of authority, problem behaviors on the bus, and use of drugs or alcohol at school. As indicated, it can be

seen that the most common problems generally were also rated as the most serious ones. The two exceptions were tardiness and use of drugs and alcohol at school. Tardiness, second in terms of being most common, was not ranked among the five most serious problems. Use of drugs and alcohol at school, while not ranked among the five most common problems, was ranked fifth among the most serious problems.

Discussion

Direct comparison with earlier studies is somewhat difficult, since the respondent groups in those studies differed from the respondent groups in the present study. The present study surveyed principals and assistant principals, while the 1961 and 1974 studies of Kingston and Gentry surveyed only principals and the 1984 study of Weber and Sloan (1986) included principals, deans, counselors, and teachers. Another difference is that the present survey required the ranking of the five most common and five most serious problems. The Kingston & Gentry studies permitted principals to select several problems and Weber and Sloan (1986) requested that only a single problem be

identified. Bearing in mind these differences, some significant changes appear to have occurred in the discipline problems reported in high schools during the past three decades. The highest rankings in the Georgia study (Kingston & Gentry, 1961) included failure to do homework, congregating in halls and lavatories, truancy, and impertinence to teachers. The highest rankings reported by the same authors in their 1974 study, were truancy, failure to do homework and discourtesy to teachers. Another behavior ranking among the most common was using profane or obscene language. Weber and Sloan (1984) found that the perception of profanity and drinking as problems in secondary schools had dramatically increased from earlier studies. In the present study, profanity as a common or serious problem was ranked relatively low.

In the earlier studies, fighting and using drugs were ranked relatively low, but were ranked among the most serious discipline problems in the present study. This is congruent with the concern over widespread increases in secondary school incidents of aggression and drug use reported during the last decade (Brown &

Payne, 1988; Kaywell, 1987; Pestello, 1989; Stover, 1988).

Given the extensive media attention focused on drug and alcohol problems in adolescence, it is interesting to note that the use of drugs or alcohol was not ranked among the most common discipline problems in secondary schools. While not denying the importance of substance abuse problems, it would appear that school administrators view a number of other discipline problems as both more common and more serious. In fact, a recent national survey of 543 high schools indicated that there had been a slight decrease in drug and alcohol problems from 1980-81 to 1984-85 (Moskowitz & Jones, 1988). In sharp contrast, Weber and Sloan (1986) reported that drinking intoxicants was the most frequent discipline problem in their Illinois study. The most recent study (Shedler & Block, 1990) of the use of drugs among high school students indicates that frequent use of drugs is a symptom of an underlying personal and social maladjustment, not the cause.

All 27 possible discipline problems were examined relative to demographic variables included in the

survey. A substantially greater percentage of assistant principals viewed use of drugs or alcohol as serious; 36% for assistant principals and 15.7% for principals. It may be that, in many schools, assistant principals have more direct daily contact with the problem than principals. More males than females rated truancy as a concern; 38% of the male sample and 23.4% of the females. The opposite relationship was found with respect to concern about carrying a weapon, with 27.7 % of females ranking this as a serious problem and 18.1% of males.

Problem behavior on buses was considered a serious problem by the two smallest school systems; 56.4% and 44.8%, respectively. This sharply contrasts with the low ranking for bus problems in the schools from the largest school population category (250,000+). In this group, only 24.3% rated bus behavior as a serious problem. It is most likely that less densely populated areas require bussing students over longer distances than do densely populated school districts. Thus, total time spent on the bus may be a factor accounting for the greater concern over behavior on buses in less populated

communities. Defiance of authority was most often ranked as a serious problem in schools from the second smallest population category (2,500-4,999). A total of 72.4% of the respondents from this population category ranked defiance as a serious concern. With one exception, respondents from the remaining population categories selected defiance as a serious problem no more than 30-50% of the time. One explanation for this finding may be that tolerance of defiance is less acceptable in sparsely populated areas. Such areas may have different cultural expectations, and identify less serious transgressions as indications of defiance. More densely populated areas may show greater tolerance for minor episodes of defiance in contrast to more serious behavioral problems.

Twenty nine percent of urban respondents ranked assaults on other students as a serious problem. The next highest ranking of assaults as a serious problem was in suburban schools, and this occurred only about half as often as in urban schools (17.9%). Rankings of profanity as a common problem ranged from 9-35%, with urban schools most frequently reporting profanity as a

common problem.

Minority school populations of less than, or greater than, 50% were compared. There was little difference in discipline problems found between the two levels of minority representation in schools. However, schools with 50% or greater minority representation indicated that defiance of authority was more often a serious problem (61.6% versus 49.1%).

Conclusions

In spite of the problems in comparing studies, it appears that the nature of disciplinary problems has been changing over the past three decades with significantly more concern over direct physical or verbal expressions of aggression. The problem behaviors reported in the current study strongly suggest the need for positive interventions to reduce the occurrence of both common and serious problems. Managing these problems very likely detracts from the primary mission of secondary schools, to educate youngsters and to prepare them for future citizenship, careers, and/or college. Effective management of discipline problems is rarely a part of the formal training of most school

administrators. Most administrators probably need support both through training in behavioral management and in the effective use of such procedures as in-school suspension (Center & McKittrick, 1987). Institutions of higher education also need to address this apparent training deficiency in their preparation programs for administrators.

Families and the community need to provide greater support to schools by inculcating positive behaviors, such as self-control, and values, such as respect for the rights of others. Equally important is early intervention for these problems prior to a student's entrance into secondary school by which time they may have become chronic.

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Table 1

Respondents' Ranking of the Discipline Problems: MostCommon

1. disruptive behavior
2. tardiness
3. defiance of authority
4. problem behaviors on bus
5. fighting (mutual aggression)
6. truancy
7. cutting classes
8. dress code violations
9. use of profanity in class
10. unsanctioned smoking at school
11. use of smokeless tobacco products
12. theft of private property
13. sleeping in class
14. cheating on tests or assignments
15. vandalism of school property
16. assaults on other students
17. use of drugs or alcohol at school
- 18.5 threats with a weapon
- 18.5 vandalism of private property at school
- 20.5 sexual molestation
- 20.5 carrying a weapon
- 22.5 overt sexual behavior between students
- 22.5 selling drugs or alcohol at school
- 25.5 exposing self
- 25.5 theft of school property
- 25.5 assaults against school personnel
- 25.5 possession of pornography

Table 2

Respondents' Ranking of the Discipline Problems: MostSerious

1. fighting (mutual aggression)
2. disruptive behavior
3. defiance of authority
4. problem behaviors on bus
5. use of drugs or alcohol at school
6. tardiness
7. truancy
8. cutting classes
9. carrying a weapon
10. use of profanity in class
- 11.5 unsanctioned smoking at school
- 11.5 theft of private property
13. assaults on other students
14. use of smokeless tobacco products
15. selling drugs or alcohol at school
16. vandalism of school property
17. dress code violations
18. threats with a weapon
20. sleeping in class
20. cheating on tests or assignments
20. vandalism of private property at school
22. theft of school property
24. sexual molestation
24. overt sexual behavior between students
24. assaults against school personnel
26. possession of pornography
27. exposing self